

The Lincoln-Douglas Debate in Alton

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In the late 1840s, Abraham Lincoln was a congressman in the House of Representatives. He represented his party, the Whigs, in Washington, D. C. Lincoln had high hopes for his political career. However, things did not turn out the way he expected and he left Washington after one term. He went back to practicing law in Illinois and felt like his political career was dead.

In 1854, a Democratic Senator from Illinois, Stephen A. Douglas, managed to pass the Kansas-Nebraska Act through Congress. This act repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820. This meant that slavery might be allowed in territories where it had been prohibited before. Lincoln was appalled when he heard about this and decided he had to do something. He began giving speeches, arguing against Douglas' belief that the territories themselves should decide whether or not they wanted slavery. Lincoln believed that slavery was morally wrong and no man should own another. Although Lincoln did not win a seat in the Senate then, he was nominated by his new party, the Republicans, to run against Stephen A. Douglas in 1858.

It was not an easy race. Lincoln had problems with popularity, so he decided to follow Douglas around the state of Illinois. Douglas spoke to the crowds and afterwards, Lincoln responded to the speech with his own opinions. This strategy was fine, but Lincoln realized he did not get as many people to listen to him as did Douglas. Newspapers made fun of Lincoln, writing that he could not get an audience. Lincoln asked the advice of Norman Judd and Judd helped him come up with a plan: to be on the

same stage with Douglas and have joint discussions and arguments. This is how the most famous political debates began.

There were seven debates in all. They began in Ottawa, Illinois, and ended on October 15, 1858, in Alton, Illinois. The seventh, and last debate, became known as the turning point in Lincoln's belief that there was no middle ground for slavery.

The debates were serious discussions for the two candidates, but they were also used as entertainment for the people in the town. Parades were held, and people brought food and socialized before the debates began. The Alton debate was expected to attract a large audience. Steamboats and railroads offered special discounts from St. Louis to Alton. Lincoln's wife, Mary, and his son, Robert were present that day. The crowd was actually smaller than anticipated, but no one was disappointed. Lincoln and Douglas arrived in Alton together and the debate began at two o'clock in the afternoon.

Douglas appeared tired, and his voice was strained from all the weeks of speeches. Abraham Lincoln looked ready to debate. Douglas began the debate by discussing Lincoln's belief that the country would not stand being made into "slave states" and "free states." Douglas believed that each state should get to choose whether or not they were allowed to own slaves. He called this the "right of self-government" and felt that it was the basis for the country's government. He believed that each state should make up its own mind and other states should not interfere with those decisions. Douglas also reminded the audience that the Constitution did not prohibit slavery.

Lincoln knew that he was speaking in a state which had many supportive of slavery. He believed that slavery was morally wrong and that there was no middle ground in this issue. He also believed that slavery was the biggest issue with the

American people and that there would not be an easy compromise. Lincoln showed himself to be a true leader in this debate. He quoted the Declaration of Independence as proof that “all men are created equal” and that the creators of the Declaration of Independence did not mean that African Americans were not included in this document. Lincoln did not win the November 2 election and Douglas returned to the Senate.

There were many explanations about why Lincoln lost and Douglas won, but no one will ever know for sure. The most important thing to remember about this debate was that Abraham Lincoln stood before an audience who did not agree with his ideas and refused to back down on his beliefs that “all men are created equal.” [From Harold Holzer, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*; Timothy Good, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates and the Making of a President*; Harry E. Pratt, *The Great Debates*. “Illinois Blue Book,” 1953-1954; and David Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*.]